

# It's a State of Mind

by Captain Charles H. Benson III

It's amazing how much we take for granted sometimes. You just don't notice how good you got it 'til you don't got it anymore. After a year away from the old squadron, and deep into a functional area assignment in Staff Weenie Land, I realize that I have indeed been guilty of taking what I had for granted. I began to realize this the other day when an officer in the MI Brigade where I'm now assigned asked me how I get away with wearing my cav brass. I shrugged the question off at the time, because I thought he may have assumed that I'm an MI officer, and soon forgot all about it. Then, a couple of days later, when my neighbor in the BOQ asked me the same thing, it got me thinking. "How do you get away with wearing that cav brass, ...is that stuff authorized?" It reminded me of something that I heard a few years ago.

It all began while I was assigned to Ft. Polk and the mighty 51D(M) "Red Devils." Like so many FORSCOM units these days, our squadron's OP-TEMPO was pretty intense, and the air and ground cav troops of our squadron were deployed all over the country. My armored cav troop was wrapping up a series of back-to-back deployments. We'd supported JTF-6 in New Mexico, returned to Ft. Polk for Bradley gunnery, and were at Ft. Hood as SINCGARS testing augmentees. I received a call from the squadron XO, who told me that our troop had been tasked to replace an infantry company in Honduras in support of JTF-B. Though we weren't thrilled with the prospect of another deployment, it looked like it had the potential to be an exciting mission.

Shortly after our return to Ft. Hood, we conducted a leaders' recon to Soto Cano and were briefed on our mission by the JTF-B staff and the leadership of the company that we were going to replace. The mission was to provide reconnaissance and security for remote sites for which the JTF was responsible. There were two sites, and the standard rotation cycle called for one platoon to occupy each site while the third remained in Soto Cano to train, provide soldiers for the base reaction force, and conduct R&R.

The unit we replaced did a great job of orienting us to the area and the mission. They provided us with detailed continuity books for each of the sites, which greatly assisted in making the transition a smooth one. Each of their platoon leaders walked his counterpart through a platoon relief in place at his site, and briefed him on the details of that site's operation. Their efforts later paid off in an exceptionally smooth "battle handover" of each site to our platoons. During the leader recon we were often asked "why did they send an armored cavalry troop here to do this?" We weren't able to tell them why, and hadn't given that question much thought ourselves. But we were confident that we could get the job done, and briefed the staff on how we would do it.

We arrived in Honduras and set about the task of assuming our new mission. We occupied what is known on Soto Cano AFB as Infantry Village; a small cluster of hooches occupied by the infantry companies when they are not deployed on missions. Over the years, the infantry companies had decorated the area with all sorts of cool infantry stuff. They'd painted their regimental crests and mottoes on rocks, and put "infantry tabs" over all the entrances to the paths leading into the area. We happened to replace an airborne infantry company, so they had lots of airborne stuff all over the place, too.

While becoming acclimated and conducting the training necessary to prepare the unit for its new mission, our troopers set about the task of converting Infantry Village into Cavalry Village. They kept the old regimental crests and mottoes, but moved them to a new and more visible place of honor. They tore down the "infantry tabs" and replaced them with red and white "cavalry tabs." They replaced all the old black and gold signs in the compound with red and white ones. They even went so far as to replace all the navigation point markers on the land navigation course with red and white markers. Of course, our mortarmen ensured that an ember of the infantry spirit was kept alive in their area. They made new "infantry tabs" and placed them over the entrances to their hooch.

Not all of these changes received a warm reception. We were the first cavalry troop assigned to that mission, at least that anyone could remember, and infantry companies had become a familiar fixture. Everyone knew how an infantry company, especially a light infantry company, was organized and equipped, and the missions it was best suited for. The ARFOR commander, our temporary boss, was an infantryman, and a Green Beret to boot. The JTF-B commander was an infantryman with a long and proud association with the 82nd Abn. Many of the support personnel on the JTF staff were on loan from the 82nd Abn. Those who weren't were so enamored of their peers' berets that they swore they'd fight to be assigned there next. Some folks on the staff told me that they were surprised that an armored cavalry troop had been sent to perform this mission. They thought that we might lack the personnel, training, and equipment to do the job.

We knew that many of the changes we wanted to make might not please everyone, and were careful to bring them about gradually and gracefully. We wanted to demonstrate to our new community the style and traditions that have been a hallmark of cavalry outfits since their earliest days. The soldiers of the unit we replaced had done a magnificent job and had set some high standards, but our troopers rose to the challenge. Our goal was not to change our surroundings to make them more cavalry or less infantry; we wanted to make the place better as we left our mark on it...period.

Most important though, we also wanted to make our unit better during our time there. One of our challenges was to maximize training in as many home station METL-related tasks as possible while performing our real world mission. While we were able to train some Bradley gunnery skills, the real payoff came in honing our dismounted patrolling and reconnaissance. We trained our troopers to proficiency on dozens of tasks that our scouts normally didn't get to focus on, like demolitions, rifle marksmanship, signaling techniques, combat lifesaving, and ambush TTPs. Everyone became

more skilled in the use of our communications gear — AM and FM — and in the use of navigation and night vision devices. Because we had virtually no distracters, we were able to ratchet up our standards of physical fitness and demonstrate that cav troopers are every bit as rough and tough as anyone else.

When the relief was complete and the infantry company began heading home, my troopers settled into the routine of training, mission execution, resupply, and R&R that became their life for the next four months. With the ARFOR commander, I made my rounds between the remote sites and home base and witnessed what I think is the best work I've ever seen soldiers perform anywhere. Platoon leaders and platoon sergeants began cleaning, painting, and improving the facilities at the remote sites. They improved the reaction drills and base defense SOPs at each of the sites, and relentlessly trained their troopers to ever-higher standards in executing these drills. They planned and executed countless day and night patrols of the surrounding countryside.

Each remote site had its own dining facility and aid station. The platoon leadership ensured that our attached medics and cooks set about the task of improving their areas and services. The dining facilities got facelifts, and the aid stations thorough cleaning and restockings. Our medics taught field sanitation classes, conducted sick call, and began instructing and certifying every member of the troop as a combat lifesaver. The cooks repaired broken ice and ice cream machines, and took turns patrolling with the scouts. The platoons also continued the humanitarian assistance projects which the previous units had established. These included providing donated clothing to local villagers, and assisting a local schoolmaster with repairs to the village school.

Back at Soto Cano, our mechanics went to work repairing the HMMWVs, CUCVs, and deuce and a half we were assigned, and healing the wounds caused by rough roads. The mechanics also became experts in the craft of sling-loading. They took charge of nearly all of the aerial resupply operations to our remote sites. The mortars and FIST planned a series of live-fire exercises, and conducted EIB training. They also assisted the maintenance platoon with resupply operations, and took turns going on patrol with the scouts.

The troop XO and first sergeant worked long hours. They had already done yeoman work planning and or-

chestrating the deployment at home station and preparing facilities in Honduras for our arrival as members of the advanced party. Now, they made coordination with the various staff sections for food, fuel, supplies, and services of all types, and the all-important air missions needed to ferry people and equipment back and forth. They established our orderly room and administrative services, and made sure that personnel actions continued without interruption throughout the deployment. They planned recreational trips and tours for the platoons' R&R cycles. All of this was planned and executed by lieutenants and sergeants with very little direct involvement by me.

One day, as we were making our flight out to inspect one of the remote sites, the ARFOR commander told me that the JTF commander wanted to visit each of the remote sites with me in a week or so. The companies that had preceded us had all found the mission difficult. He was concerned about the suitability of the mission for a cavalry troop, since it was not a mission he believed that we were normally tasked with. He told me that the JTF commander, a tough soldier with demanding standards, had often left the company commanders a little sore in the hindquarters after his visits. Like a good commander, I told the boss that we'd be ready, and we went about our business.

The day the JTF commander arrived for the inspection, I was a little nervous because I hadn't spent that much time with the man since my arrival, and remembered the stories the outgoing company commander had told. We flew from Soto Cano to our first site in a UH-1. It was a beautiful sunny morning, and we flew with doors open. As we made our approach, we could see a hint of mist around the mountaintop site, and the forest below seemed lush and wild.

It seemed that some distant memory was awakened in the colonel as the Huey got close enough to the site for him to see the compound guard tower. The platoon at that site had painted the roof of the tower red and white, and turned it into a large cavalry flash. We could see troopers hurrying to secure windows to lock out the prop wash, and running with weapons to man the perimeter. Every movement seemed planned and executed with a sense of urgency and purpose. The colonel looked at me, smiled, relaxed in his seat, and enjoyed the rest of the ride in.

Once on the ground, he strolled around the compound, talking with the platoon leader and platoon sergeant, and chatting with individual troopers as they went about their duties.

The scenario repeated itself when we visited our second site. There was none of the shouting or butt chewing that I'd been told to expect. There was just an old soldier obviously enjoying the company of some young troopers who were working hard and serving their country far from home.

As we were walking around, the colonel stopped and turned to me and said "You know, Chuck, I was a bit concerned when I heard they were sending me a cav troop to do this job. But, after seeing your guys and their work, and just watching how they work, I think that we got the right unit for the job. This mission seems like a perfect cavalry mission to me now. And the troopers... you know they're your troopers just by the way they carry themselves. They don't have berets, or the most modern equipment, but the way they walk radiates a sense of pride and confidence in who they are... they're just regular soldiers who give a damn about their job, and it shows. I haven't seen anything like them in a long time, and am proud to have had the opportunity to serve with them."

Later in the visit, the colonel was talking with one of the platoon sergeants, and he asked the NCO what he thought set his platoon apart from the others. "It's their cavalry state of mind, sir," he replied. The colonel didn't seem to worry about the remote sites from that day on.

I changed command half way through this mission to assume a second command. During the flight home, I thought about what I wanted to take with me to my next troop, based on the lessons learned in good old Alpha. Of the many things I listed in my solo AAR, the one that stuck and that keeps coming back is that cavalry is a state of mind. This state of mind was what sets us apart from our peers, and inspired us to call out the old "if you ain't cav, you ain't..." cadence during our morning PT runs.

A couple of years have passed since that day, and I've had a lot of time to reflect upon what that platoon sergeant said, and why it has taken on a special significance for me. He was not boast-

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ing about his platoon; it was a tribute to his troopers' spirit, and the way they went about their job. Those troopers didn't do what they did so well because of me. Lord knows, they often did well in spite of me. They didn't do their job well because they were glad to be in a strange country far away, with few of the comforts of home. Like it does for most of us, that stuff got old for them real fast. I think that those troopers did well, and made the great impression that they did, because of what they had inside. Their "state of mind" permeated almost every thought, and was reflected in nearly all of their deeds.

They weren't perfect, but they were close enough.

It's the lean-forward-in-the-saddle attitude, the ability to innovate and adapt quickly to new and challenging situations, and the pride in the unit that those troopers possessed that I'll always remember. And it's the gratitude that I owe to each and every member of that unit for their loyalty and unwavering high standards of mission accomplishment. That's why I'm still wearing my cavalry brass.

Captain Charles H. Benson III, commissioned in Armor from OCS in 1986, has served as a tank platoon leader, HHC XO, and adjutant in 3/8 Cav, 3AD, FRG; and as squadron motor officer, Troop A Cdr, and HHT Cdr, 3/1 Cav, 5ID (M), Ft. Polk and 2/1 Cav, 2AD, Ft. Polk/Ft. Hood. He is currently assigned to A/532 MI Bn, 501 MI Bde in Korea, as Automation Management Officer CJ2/3. He holds a BA from the University of Alaska, Anchorage, and an MA from Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.